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Note*

## U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

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To : The Acting Secretary  
Through: S/S  
From : INR - Thomas L. Hughes *TH*

Subject: Guyana/Surinam: Guyanese Attack Raises Spectre of Renewed  
Border Militancy

At six a.m. on August 19 a planeload of Guyanese Defense Force troops landed on and successfully occupied a Surinamese outpost near the Courantyne River in the disputed New River Triangle area. The attack was bloodlessly executed and involved relatively few troops but it gives a clear indication of Guyana's sensitivity over the territorial ambitions of two of its three neighbors. The Venezuelans, who claim five-eighths of Guyana's 83,000 square miles are likely to seize on Guyana's militancy toward Surinam as an excuse to renew their border pressure. The Surinamese claim, while not so well known or so vigorously pursued as that of Venezuela, is nevertheless another serious threat to Guyana, and is another potentially disruptive factor in the hemisphere.

Surinam's claim based on Geographer's error. At the close of the 18th century the local governors of the two colonies of Berbice and Guiana (which later became known as Guyana and Surinam respectively) agreed that the Courantyne River would form the dividing line between the two colonies. Both the Dutch and the British accepted this agreement, but reserved judgment as to which of the various rivers was the principal tributary of the Courantyne,

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and thus the final delimitation of the boundary to the Brazilian border. An early adventurer named Schomburgh explored the area, and on the basis of his expedition in 1843 it was decided that the headwater of the Courantyne was the Kutari (or Curuni) River. Until 1871 this river was generally accepted by both powers to be the boundary. In that year another river, the New, was discovered to the west of the Kutari which was both wider and had a heavier flow. As a result, the Dutch began to claim that the New River, and not the Kutari, was the headwater. (See Map on following page.) The triangular-shaped region between the two rivers of approximately 5,800 square miles of densely forested, almost uninhabited land continued to be occupied by the British despite periodic protests by the Dutch. In 1939 a treaty recognizing the Kutari as the boundary was negotiated (but not signed) by the British and Dutch. The Dutch reorganization of its colonies following WW II gave enough independence to the Surinamese to prevent the agreement being concluded without their approval. Thus the dispute has continued unresolved to the present; the Guyanese point to centuries of peaceful occupation of the area as the foundation of its claim, the Surinamese adhere steadfastly to the need to rectify the early geographic error.

Press reports probably provoked Guyanese Move. During a routine patrol of the disputed area in early 1968 the Guyanese Defense Force (GDF) discovered Surinamese police units at a point known as Tigri. In March of 1968, Prime Minister Burnham of Guyana became so concerned

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that he ordered the GDF to remove the Surinamese by force. Guyana's Foreign Minister, the UK High Commissioner and the US Ambassador, after much effort, managed to convince Prime Minister Burnham to refrain from military action in order to give more time to search for a peaceful solution. However, attempts to reach such a solution bogged down, apparently because Surinamese Minister-President Pengel, despite urging by the Netherlands government, refused to enter a dialogue with the Guyanese. The small Surinamese unit remained at Tiéri without interference from the Guyanese.

But on August 9, 1969, a Guyanese newspaper reporter widely known to support the Peoples Progressive Party of Cheddi Jagan published a story in a Georgetown newspaper disclosing the existence of Surinamese forces on Guyanese territory. Such a revelation would have been embarrassing to Burnham from any source, but coming from a recognized spokesman of the opposition it probably made some sort of reaction by Burnham imperative. Burnham therefore ordered the Guyanese Defense Force to move under/<sup>cover</sup> of an announced "training exercise." The August 19 operation was quickly and skillfully executed without loss of life on either side, the Surinamese retiring from the scene by boat after only token resistance. The Surinamese government has vowed to send "reinforcements" to the area, but they will be under orders not to commit any "aggressive acts" according to an announcement by the interim Minister-President of Surinam. If indeed they are dispatched, they are not likely to oust the 200 or so well-armed Guyanese soldiers

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now occupying the Tigri site.

Surinam not ready for major confrontation. A political crisis last spring left Surinam with only a caretaker government, which will be replaced by an elected government following elections probably to be held this October. The Surinamese government therefore is not likely to undertake any serious military action since it lacks a stable political base. The Dutch retain responsibility for defense and foreign affairs in Surinam. The Dutch government has delivered a protest note to the Guyanese Ambassador to the Hague, but it is reluctant to intervene in the affair. The June disorders in Curacao weigh heavily in Dutch considerations and they have announced that they will intervene militarily only if the Guyanese attack within Surinam's recognized boundaries.

Venezuela's Essequibo Hawks will be Encouraged by Guyanese Action.

While the Surinamese sputter and fume (at least for the present), those Venezuelans who have long advocated more vigorous action to recover their own "lost" Essequibo territory from Guyana will no doubt be emboldened by the Guyanese move against Surinam. Exploiting Guyanese militancy against Surinam, the Venezuelans could concoct a plan such as one recently reported being hatched by some officials of a Venezuelan intelligence unit. According to this plan it would be charged that the Guyanese were supporting Venezuelan guerrillas for operations in the remote Orinoco Delta-Ciudad Bolivar region in order to satisfy the demands of Marxist Cheddi Jagan, and to keep the Venezuelan military off balance. This would provide an excuse for the movement of Venezuelan troops up to the sensitive border region, and, presumably,

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for attacks against supposed guerrilla bases in the disputed Essequibo territory. There is scant indication that the Venezuelans will actually attempt such a subterfuge--President Caldera has on several occasions publically committed Venezuela to search for a peaceful solution to the conflict--but the subject of Guyanese support for Venezuelan guerrillas was discussed by Venezuela's Deputy Foreign Minister when he briefed the US Charge after the Tigri incident. In addition Venezuelan Foreign Minister Aristides Calvani has seized upon the Tigri incident to blast "constant Guyanese efforts" to make Venezuela appear the aggressor in the Essequibo dispute, to accuse Guyana of increasing its forces along the Venezuelan border, and to declare somewhat ominously that Venezuela might be forced to abandon its resolve to "peacefully" pursue its claim. A continuation of this line would justify fears that the Venezuelans plan to undertake more militant action.

OAS Intervention unlikely. A Venezuelan-sponsored OAS resolution declaring ineligible for membership a country having an outstanding border dispute with a current member has frozen Guyana out of that organization. Surinam, which retains the status of a Dutch colony (albeit an almost independent one) is also ineligible for membership. The disputants in the Tigri incident are therefore unable to petition the intervention of the OAS. Those interested third parties, including the US and Brazil, who would prefer that the incident not become the basis for further military action, will thus be forced to deal directly

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with the disputants, or possibly await UN action. Unfortunately, neither of these two alternatives would seem to be an effective avenue for the reduction of tensions in the immediate future.

Guyana's Prime Minister Burnham has stated his willingness to take his country's dispute with Surinam to the World Court, but the Surinamese, smarting from the ease with which their police unit was dislodged, and knowing that their case is much stronger on geographic than legal grounds, will be reluctant to agree to any acceptance of the proposal by the Dutch government.

Guyana Shows Weakness of its Position. The most important conclusion to be drawn from the current incident is that the Guyanese are unable to withstand much pressure on their borders without resorting to action. Prime Minister Burnham beset from within by both an increasingly radical, pro-communist opposition, and an ultra-nationalistic black power movement in his own party, cannot afford the political luxury of withholding a vigorous reply to provocations from abroad. In addition, in dealing with Venezuela, he has neither the government staff nor the economic resources to counter a propaganda campaign, or to parry diplomatic thrusts such as that levelled at him by the Venezuelan Foreign Minister following the recent Tigri episode. The additional pressure of border problems with the Surinamese would virtually assure Guyana's adoption of a militantly defensive posture, leading possibly to further, more serious border clashes.

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